

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH REAR ADMIRAL MARK BUZBY,
COMMANDER, JOINT TASK FORCE GUANTANAMO VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 9:29 A.M. EDT
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Being
respectful of the admiral's time, we'll go ahead and get started, and as the
others join us, we can conference them in.

With us on the phone today for the Bloggers Roundtable, Rear Admiral
Mark Buzby, who is the commander of the Joint Task Force Guantanamo in
Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Admiral Buzby, thank you very much for joining us. We're ready when
you are, sir.

ADM. BUZBY: Thank you. Good morning, Jack. Good morning everybody.
A pleasure to be with you this morning. Look forward to your questions.

Just as a kind of preamble, I have been here just about a year. As a
matter of fact, tomorrow will be my one-year anniversary of taking command.
And it's been quite a year, as you can probably well imagine. It has been
fascinating and interesting and challenging, and probably one of the highlights
of my career, quite frankly.

As you know, our mission is pretty straightforward. We're all about
the safe and humane care and custody of detained enemy combatants. We do that
safely and we also do it ethically and transparently, and, of course, in strict
accordance with the law.

We'll maybe pause there and see who else has joined us?

MR. HOLT: Okay. Who else joined us here?

Q John McCormack, at the Weekly Standard.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much.

All right, sir.

ADM. BUZBY: Great. So, welcome.

It's been, as I said, a fascinating year. Went by very, very quickly.
A lot of issues, obviously, that are out there floating around.

The one thing I would say that has really kind of struck home with me in this past year is there are two Guantanimos. There is the Guantanamo that exists in what I would call pop culture and the media and most people's minds, and then there is the Guantanamo that exists here, the one that I see every day, and that's, quite frankly, people that come down here to actually see the conditions and see what's going on down here experience. And it's typically very much different than what it's portrayed, typically, you know, in popular culture.

So that's been a real challenge for me and for those of us down here, to try and strategically communicate that it may not all be what it seems. And the greatest compliment that I get from visitors is, "Gosh, I never realized it was so different. I was led to believe it was something totally different." And almost all are impressed by what they see.

And I feel that I need to do that, to point that out to people and to spread that word, not only because I believe it is the truth but to defend my great soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen and civilians that are working here. You know, they're toiling under some pretty arduous conditions and to be, you know, misrepresented their efforts -- you know, it galls me. And as a commander, I think it's my duty to defend them which is what I have attempted to do this past year.

So with that, I will throw it over to you all. I'm standing by for your questions. MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much, sir.

Andrew, you were first online, so why don't you get us started?

Q Admiral, good morning. This is Andrew Lubin from the Military Observer. I appreciate the time you're spending with us, sir.

ADM. BUZBY: Good morning.

Q Good morning. Sir, I've got a perfect question for you then, basis of your opening statement. I was down in Guantanamo about three weeks ago for the Hamdan hearings and requested before I was -- before I left and also during the time to inspect some of the detainee facilities. And I was turned down for security reasons.

Now, this weekend, this past weekend in Philadelphia, where I live, I'm listening to the radio. A New Jersey rock group called Everclear, who I never heard of, is going to play for the troops in Guantanamo, which is great. They're advertising they're going to tour the detainee facilities. I'm a journalist. I'm a writer. I'm an author. I can't see the facilities and a rock group can?

Can you address this, please?

ADM. BUZBY: Yeah, I sure can, Andrew. It's kind of been our policy to keep a group of people coming down to report on the commissions separate from those that come over and tour the camps. We've done it primarily just because I don't have enough people. I am so shy of escorts to handle both at the same time, so I handle, kind of, one at a time. We have more people coming, and I have more people detailed in so that, you know, perhaps very soon here we will be able to do that. But that was a decision that was made -- I asked for enough

people to do both, and that was a decision that was made, you know, by the leadership above me that, you know, you're going to do one at a time.

You know, if you wanted to come down here to tour the camps, we would, you know, be thrilled to have you to do that. And we do -- I mean, I have media here virtually every week except when we have commissions running. We take them through. So I would -- I extend the invitation to you to come to see it.

Q Admiral, again, I don't mean to be combative. I enjoyed my trip down there. I'm looking forward to coming back for the Hamdan trial. But I applied -- I sent the e-mail through the website, and that was probably March. And I'm thinking as of now, middle May, I have yet to receive a response. I would love to come down. I didn't even get a response through the -- through the PAOs down there. I'd love to get to come down, but I can't.

ADM. BUZBY: My PAO's sitting here with me, and we're going to look in and find out what the status of that request is so that -- you know, every one of them comes across my desk for approval, and I have not turned down a single one since I've been here. So, for whatever reason, it hasn't made it to me, but I'm going to ask my PAO to track back and find out what the status of your -- your specific request is.

Q Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.

ADM. BUZBY: You bet.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Dr. Soldz.

Q Yeah, hi, Admiral. I am Stephen Soldz, a psychologist. I have a blog and write for various websites. One thing I'm interested in is the conditions of detainees. In particular, The New York Times reported in the last week or two confirming something that Amnesty had said last April, which is that approximately three-quarters of the detainees are kept in essentially permanent isolation (units ?), in, I believe, eight-foot by 12-foot cells. And I'd like to hear from you if that's true, and why that is and the effects on the detainees.

I was actually just talking to a defense attorney, one of the military JAGs, whose client has been in kept in these conditions for five and a half years and is -- frankly, is losing his mind.

So I was interested in hearing your thoughts about that.

ADM. BUZBY: Certainly. Yeah, the conditions of detention for the majority of our detainees are such that they are kept in facilities that are the same as U.S. prison facilities. Matter of fact, our Camp 5 and Camp 6, which is where about 75 percent of our population -- detainee population lives, those two buildings are actually models of a facility in Indiana -- a prison in Indiana and a prison in Michigan that were brought down here and built, so that the very same conditions that U.S. Bureau of Prisons prisoners live in are what our detainees live in, in terms of their place of incarceration.

Every detainee, no matter what their compliancy status is -- in other words, how well they behave and everything else -- they all get at least two hours of outdoor recreation with other people every day, every single day. They also get a shower every single day, which is actually more than the Bureau of Prisons offers their high-security folks.

For those other 25 percent that are in highly compliant status -- in other words, they behave very well and follow the camp rules -- they are in a place called Camp 4, which is a very open-air, communal sort of facility, where they live in groups of six in a bunk room, if you will. And they have access to recreation about 22 hours a day, including group recreation and group prayer and all that sort of thing.

So to say that our conditions are especially arduous or different than, you know, what, you know, a normal prisoner might find in the Bureau of Prisons systems, I don't -- I think is probably twisting the truth quite a bit.

Q I just --

ADM. BUZBY: In terms of what we see in terms of mental stability of the detainees, we -- about 17 percent of our detainee population is on services from our behavioral health unit, our psychologist and our psychiatrists, which is about half of what the rate is for, again, Bureau of Prisons populations.

They are not shy about requesting services when they need services. Saw about -- a very small percentage, about -- I want to say about 5 percent are on psychotropic medications for various typical ailments that, you know, would affect any population.

We have, as I've said, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, six psychiatric nurses and a whole host of trained corpsmen, who are specifically focused just on our detainee population. We have a detention -- a detainee hospital for psychiatric needs and, you know, it's got 16 beds. Typically we have three or four in at any given time.

So we take that very seriously. I do not see a -- significant mental breakdown issues. I go around and look -- I put eyes on every detainee every single week and I get reports on a daily basis on the conditions. And the detainees, quite frankly, are asked at least once a week how they're feeling and how they're doing.

So I have pretty good confidence that we're taking very good care of these people and that there's not a bunch of people going insane down here.

Q Admiral, if I could just follow up, my understanding is that those prisons in Indiana and Michigan are supermax prisons that are for a very, very tiny fraction of those in the U.S. Bureau of Prisons. It doesn't seem a fair comparison to compare three-quarters of the detainees held at Guantanamo, many of whom are -- either are innocent or were involved in fairly minor actions, with the worst of the worst of the worst in the Bureau of Prisons, who generally end up in supermaxes because they've attempted to kill somebody, or something comparable, in the prison system. And also, supermaxes are in principle supposed to be temporary, not permanent facilities.

So, how do you justify that comparison there?

ADM. BUZBY: What I would say so -- sir, is that people are placed in the various camps based on their compliance with camp rules. Any one of those detainees can earn their way into Camp 4 through compliance with camp rules and just behaving themselves. You know, regardless of how they got here, I -- obviously, I don't have any control over how they got here.

My concern now is, now that they're here, are they behaving? And are they, you know, following camp rules?

And by following camp rules, I mean, you know, not kicking guards, not throwing feces on them, not spitting on them, not biting them, you know, just following the normal, you know, procedure for living that they can --

Those that do, you know, behave themselves end up Camp 4. I have lots of capacity in Camp 4. That's not being used right now because, you know, a lot of those detainees aren't behaving themselves.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And John.

Q Yes.

I was wondering, how do you ensure that those in Camp 4 are not, you know, conspiring? How many attacks have you had, in Guantanamo, of the detainees upon guards? And how do you prevent against those attacks? And how do you ensure that this, you know, communal living, 22 hours per day of recreation, isn't leading to any conspiracies?

ADM. BUZBY: Well, that's a very good question. And quite frankly I assume risk. I assume some risk by allowing that to occur.

And you know, there has been one riot, one uprising, in Guantanamo history, back in June of 2006, sorry, May of 2006. And it occurred in Camp 4. And there was about \$500,000 damage done to the camp during the course of that uprising.

It was also the only time that non-lethal firearms were ever used, discharged, within the bounds of this camp, by the most compliant detainees, that banded together and decided they did not want their quarters to be searched during a campwide search. So that possibility exists.

Now, I have taken measures since that time to ensure, to lessen the risk, mitigate part of that risk, by decreasing the population, if you will, of Camp 4, by more closely vetting those that go in there. I personally vet every detainee that goes into Camp 4 now, so that I see their background, what they did prior to get capture and how they've behaved since they've been here. And we've spread out. We've depopulated some of the bunkrooms, so that they're not quite as tightly packed as they were. And quite frankly we pay a little bit more attention to who we're putting in there. Again you've got to earn your way into Camp 4. And we have people coming in and going out of Camp 4 all the time.

You know, you only have to do something a little bit wrong to get out of Camp 4, because it's a very great privilege and highly desired, by most detainees, to get in there. But you know, there is a large group that choose not to go in there through their behavior.

But you know, it's -- so the bottom line is, Camp 4 on a typical day is a very calm place. You know, people are behaving themselves well. They police themselves fairly well, because many of the people, that are detained there, like the conditions and they don't want to screw it up or have it screwed up for them.

So oftentimes, If someone is starting to act up a little bit in that particular hooch, you know, one of the guys will come to the fence and say to the guard, "Hey, this fellow -- my brother over here has got some issues and, you know, we need to -- we need to go someplace else." So they self-police themselves pretty well.

But yes, it is a risk. And yes, it causes me some concern from time to time.

Q And how many -- does Guantanamo -- do you produce a report on how many attacks from detainees upon guards occur each year? And where could I find that out if I wanted to look at that? And do you report on the exact instances, the precise nature of the attacks?

ADM. BUZBY: We have a slide that we brief as both a part of our classified and our unclassified briefings. And we can get that available to you. It lists probably about 15 or 18 different categories of detainee misbehavior, if you will, running from, you know, the high end of, you know, actual physical attacks -- headbutting, biting, kicking, that kind of stuff, physical, you know, abuses -- to feces-throws to spitting to forced cell-extractions due to, you know, noncompliance with direction to leave their cell, up to just harassment or just noncompliance, failure to follow orders, which seems to be the more prevalent.

I think they've actually moved away from a lot of the physical things. They're becoming a little bit more rare. But what we have seen a vast spike in is just failure to follow guard orders, just, you know, ignoring guard instructions, being, you know, difficult to deal with.

If you look back at the Irish experience back when the U.K. had a lot of folks in Northern Ireland in prisons back in the '60s and '70s, you know, the same sort of tactics we see them following here. There's feces-smearing; there's dirty protests; there's hunger striking; there's just failure to follow orders in an attempt to work on the guard to just make life miserable for them with the hopes that they'll either crack or form fissures between the guard force that they can then exploit.

It's following a fairly traditional path, I would say, in behavior of those being incarcerated.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And I'll get with your PAO, sir, and we'll get that -

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ADM. BUZBY: Yup, we'll get you that slide.

MR. HOLT: Yeah, we'll --

ADM. BUZBY: The bar slide that shows the last three years of activity, so you can see how it all pans out.

Q And just a very small question, but what is the current detainee population? And how has that fluctuated over the past five years?

ADM. BUZBY: Well, we have about 270 here now. That has gone down since I've been here by about a hundred, a little more. Overall, since Guantanamo opened, we've sent over 520 out of here, either transferred or released.

Q So since Guantanamo opened, you've had 520 -- you released 520 prisoners, detainees?

ADM. BUZBY: Released or transferred. That's correct.

Q Okay. Do you know what ratio is released and what was transferred?

ADM. BUZBY: I've -- you know, I really don't. I don't know what that breakdown is. I would say -- I would characterize it as the vast majority have been transferred to other countries, not that many released. Most of them were transferred, and which of course, you know, carries risks in itself, as we just saw recently with the Kuwaiti former detainee who, you know, martyred himself in a bombing. So those -- and we know of several others that have done the same. So it's -- that's more risk that we take when we do that.

Q And do you have -- does anyone at the camp or also at DOD who would have a list of any known records of former detainees who are popping up back on the battlefield or in terrorist activities and that we're tracking again? Do we know the numbers? ADM. BUZBY: DOD is tracking that. My -- last figure I saw was in the 30s of people that we're pretty sure have gone back -- have rejoined the band, if you will, and are back at it.

Q So you said over 30?

ADM. BUZBY: About -- it's in the 30s, yeah.

Q Thirties.

And are the people who we simply tracked who have rejoined terrorist organizations or that we've actually implicated in terrorist crimes, activities, conspiracies?

ADM. BUZBY: I think it's that they have gone back into associations with, you know, former associates that are -- continue to be tied with al Qaeda and al Qaeda-related franchise organizations.

MR. HOLT: All right. And okay, any other follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, I have one. Admiral, Andrew Lubin again.

ADM. BUZBY: Sir.

Q Sir, if you take -- when I -- again, I was down for the Hamdan hearing, the defense attorneys for Hamdan, the people out of Perkins Coie were saying that after he won in -- at the Supreme Court, he was put back in solitary confinement for punitive reasons. Could you address that?

ADM. BUZBY: Sure. We don't have any solitary confinement down here in Guantanamo. So that's pretty easy.

Q Okay.

ADM. BUZBY: What we have is single cells. I mean, there's one person to a cell. All the cells are all right next to each other. So I guess -- I suppose it's what you call solitary confinement. We -- you know, it's the same

sort of confinement -- solitary, to me, is when you're separated totally from the whole population in a cell, and that's it. And we don't have that here. Everyone is in their own cell, but they are all together in a group. So --

Q That's like having a single apartment in a fraternity house.

ADM. BUZBY: Pretty much. Single room.

Q So he can knock on the walls, talk to people next door, basically. I mean, they --

ADM. BUZBY: He can talk all day long, and they do. They talk between cells, they talk between tiers, they talk between camps. It's not quiet over there, let me tell you.

Q Far different than what I'd understood, so that's good to hear.

ADM. BUZBY: Absolutely. Well, again, it gets back to my opening statement.

MR. HOLT: All right. Any other --

Q Admiral, I'm interested in the Behavioral Science Consultation Teams, the BSCTs.

ADM. BUZBY: Sir.

Q Are there still BSCTs there? And what do they do? And what is their composition?

ADM. BUZBY: Yes, we still do, sir. I have a three-person BSCT, I believe, right now. They're turning over, but three-person BSCT. And they actually are very important to me maintaining visibility for force-protection reasons on what's going on in the camps. They provide a very important bit of advice and observation to my detention people, the people that are maintaining the actual physical custody of the detainees, to understand why detainees are doing certain things and why they are behaving in a certain way. The BSCT folks are great folks for walking around, observing detainee behavior and helping us understand what they're doing so that we can craft an appropriate response, either, you know, let them alone or respond this way or respond that way. So they are kind of a critical part of our operation.

Q Are there interrogations still going on? And do they participate in interrogations at this point?

ADM. BUZBY: There still are interrogations going on, and they do not participate in any interrogations.

Q So they're completely out of that.

ADM. BUZBY: Absolutely. They're really --

Q And since when? Since when? ADM. BUZBY: Their behavior -- you know, they help us understand the behavior of the detainees on the blocks, primarily.

Q Since when have they been out of interrogations?

ADM. BUZBY: I couldn't tell you. Not since I've been here.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. All right, anything else? We're just about out of time here.

Okay, Admiral, if you would -- do you have anything, any closing comments for us, closing statement for us, sir?

ADM. BUZBY: No, other than, as I said, I will be relieved of my duties here next week. And I go, actually, feeling very sad about leaving.

This has been -- this is my fourth command that I've had in the service, by far the most challenging but by far the most rewarding. I feel like I really made a contribution in the global war on terror.

And you know, the fantastic people that I've had the privilege to lead down here -- I can't say enough about them. They are magnificent young men and women who do a very, very difficult job every single day under some unbelievably arduous conditions, keep a fantastic attitude. And they are a source of great energy for me whenever I walk around, as I do quite often, to thank them, because, you know, I have to tell them, they are never going to be adequately thanked for the difficult mission that they're doing every single day. And I just wish more people would appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. We appreciate your participation here, and we appreciate getting the chance to speak to you here on the Bloggers Roundtable. And thank you, sir, very much.

ADM. BUZBY: My pleasure. Thank you.

Q Admiral, Admiral, thank you for the time. Appreciate it.

Q Same here.

END.